

C O N F I D E N T I A L OSLO 000181

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL BO NO

SUBJECT: DIALOGUE WITH BELARUSIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Classified By: P/E Chief Mike Hammer, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Ambassador brought together visiting Belarusian human rights activist Aliaksandr Bialiatski, Norwegian government officials and NGOs on February 16. Bialiatski greatly appreciated us hosting him and stressed the key role of the international community providing political and financial support to Belarusian civil society and the NGO community in the run-up to the March elections, but equally important afterwards as well. "We are not about to witness an Orange revolution; Lukashenko's regime will not reform. It will have to be removed," Bialiatski explained. Bialiatski described the difficult environment he and other activists face in trying to promote democracy and suggested that the international community can be of most help if it supports a free and independent press. End summary.

Belarusian People Need Continued International Support

¶2. (C) The Ambassador hosted Aliaksandr Bialiatski, his colleagues, and Norwegian government officials and human rights leaders for a frank discussion on the state-of-play in Belarus. Bialiatski described how the Belarusian opposition had come together to support Alexander Milinkevich. In fact, Bialiatski said Lukashenko moved up the elections because of Milinkevich's steady rise in the polls. That said, Bialiatski said that we should not expect an Orange revolution like in Ukraine. He did not harbor any hope for reform under the Lukashenko regime and said that it would have to be removed. Bialiatski's view is that Belarus would have to get new leaders before any true transformation could occur. And, since the March 16 election will not produce that result, Bialiatski urged that the international community not abandon the Belarusian people. Support is wonderful now, but would be needed even more after the elections, Bialiatski urged.

¶3. (C) Aliaksandr Bialiatski was in Oslo to receive the 2006 Norwegian Helsinki Committee's Andrei Sakharov Freedom Award. Present at the Ambassador's residence were Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim, leading NGOs such as Amnesty International Norway, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and youth groups that focus on Belarus. Solheim, and the other Norwegian participants, agreed that Norway will continue to stay focused on developments in Belarus even beyond the elections. The Amnesty International representative noted that sadly Belarus gets little attention as it seems that attention is focused on other international crisis. A Norwegian youth party leader highlighted the efforts by students at Oslo University to raise awareness about the dire situation in Belarus by having candlelight vigils in front of parliament on the 16th of every month, noting that these will continue even after the elections. After the event, the Oslo University newspaper conducted a joint interview with Bialiatski and the Ambassador.

Belarusians are Eager for Change

¶4. (C) Bialiatski expressed the NGO and civil society's desire for change, but noted that the people of Belarus were ready to vote for a new leader but not necessarily ready to demonstrate in the streets for one. The average Belarusian lives with daily repression and often without any outside, independent news. This creates a difficult environment and limits Bialiatski and other civil society groups' ability to educate and motivate the people to push for democratic changes.

¶5. (C) Bialiatski stressed the importance of international support for a free and independent press in Belarus. With an independent press, Bialiatski feels that the NGOs and civil society could better inspire people to press for much needed democratic changes. Bialiatski suggested that one concrete way this might be achieved was by transmitting radio broadcasts from a neighboring country, as Radio Free Europe has done successfully in other countries in the past. He also urged support for the few independent newspapers still operating in Belarus.

Comment

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16. (C) Bialiatski was extremely appreciative that we would receive him during his visit to Oslo and "secretly" mentioned that he enjoyed close cooperation with our Embassy and Ambassador in Minsk. Bialiatski clearly felt U.S. support was important to his Viasna human rights center, but was equally important for the Belarusian people. He hoped that the United States and the EU will continue to maintain a spotlight on the Lukashenko regime.  
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